

In Pursuit of an Owenian Pastoral Theology II: The Pastor and his Work according to John Owen

By Angelo O. Valle

INTRODUCTION

The driving force behind John Owen's writing on pastoral theology is a yearning for fidelity, both in its source and its application. Owen was able to see beyond his own historical moment by engaging in a critical appropriation of what pastors and theologians had considered before him. By these means he was able to avoid limiting his concept of pastoral ministry according to the norms of his time and place.

In *True Nature of a Gospel Church*, Owen concerned himself with positively defining how a gospel church ought to function. The book itself was written as a response against Edward Stillingfleet's, *The Unreasonableness of Separation* (1681) and was released posthumously in 1689. Owen's goal in *True Nature of a Gospel Church* was not merely to positively define pastoral ministry according to his exegetical findings. He hoped to sufficiently answer every objection that would attempt to contradict his conclusions. As is typical of Owen's style, his aim is to ground his every argument from the fruit of his exegesis. But in addition to his presentation of the biblical data, he sought to buttress his arguments on the nature of a gospel church with extra-biblical data, such as the writings of the early church.

As he engaged in polemic theology against

Stillingfleet, Owen viewed himself as a faithful arbiter of the Western catholic tradition. In his chapter on "The Especial Duty of Pastors of Churches" in *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*, Owen placed his rigorous catholicity on full display. There one can find references such as Gregory Nazianzen, the canons of the councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, the synod of Ephesus concerning Eustathius, Clement's first epistle to the Corinthians, Photius, and the synod of Constantinople.¹ Owen's goal was to convince his readership that the pastoral ministry he was presenting in his work was the most faithful budding of the Western catholic tradition, as handed down by the Apostles, and echoed amongst the Fathers of the church, and those of the medieval era.

Nevertheless, Owen's appreciation and appropriation of church history as an authority was always balanced by his exegetical convictions. Owen wrote, "I shall ever judge that there is more safety in a strict adherence unto [the] apostolical practice and example than in a compliance with all the canons of councils or churches afterward" (*Works* 16:60). Ever the academic, Owen's critical reception of church history was also bolstered by his familiarity and use of pagan literature to help exposit key words in Greek or Latin, and parallel concepts in order to better gird his theses (e.g., 16:62, 120).

When reading Owen, his exhaustive nature can often function as a hurdle even in his more practical writings. To help navigate through his writings, this study will limit itself to the Restoration era, that is, from 1662 to the year of his death, 1683. What may be fruitful for in such a study is that Owen's understanding of pastoral ministry is emerging from a historical moment where pastoral work according to his unique convictions becomes costly, difficult, and simply dangerous.

Though a wide range of sources will be considered, Owen's *True Nature of a Gospel Church* most explicitly provides a starting point in seeing his most mature

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1. *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (1850–1853; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965–2008), 16:94–96. Hereafter *Works*. Repeated references will be given parenthetically by volume and page number.

thought on pastoral ministry, as it was written in the last few years of his life. Other notable texts such as *A Brief Instruction* and *A Discourse of Spiritual Gifts* will also function as markers of development to aid towards seeking to establish his own pastoral theological trajectories.

During his explanation of pastoral ministry in *A True Nature of a Gospel Church*, Owen noted his own limited scope in the present work. Owen made clear that the data presented was *sufficient*, though *not exhaustive*. In turn, modern readership should come to terms with the limited sketch that is provided. A helpful reminder then is to see Owen's *True Nature of a Gospel Church* primarily within the constraints of its historical moment. *True Nature of a Gospel Church* is first and foremost a response to Stillingfleet's *The Unreasonableness of Separation*. As such, it is inherently bound to have its scope controlled by an outside source. Owen wrote, "It is not my present design or work to give a full account of the qualifications required in persons to be called unto this [pastoral] office, nor of their duty and work, with the qualities or virtues to be exercised therein."² Owen made the scope of his work explicit, but also pointed his readers towards other subsequent manuals on pastoral ministry that were already available at the time. Much to the researcher's chagrin he doesn't list any. Another vein of fruitful research would be to identify the unnamed pastoral manuals Owen highlighted for his readership.

Considering Owen's limited scope in *True Nature of a Gospel Church*, his readers are drawn to consider his work as a gateway to what he has written elsewhere in order to distill a fuller definition of the duties of pastoral ministry. As Owen admitted, *True Nature of a Gospel Church* cannot provide an exhaustive explanation of his pastoral theology. Therefore, in order to circumvent this inherent limitation, a guided study through Owen's other writings of the Restoration era needs to be examined to help fill in the gaps. The difficulty comes from the common feature of Owen's style: his prolixity. Owen himself provided a compass through the biblical passages which he attached to the nature and duties of pastoral ministry in *True Nature of a Gospel Church*. Such scriptural references assist the reader in helping to find relevant comments on pastoral ministry throughout his other writings. *True Nature of a Gospel Church* functions then as a useful starting point because of its self-conscious desire to define pastoral ministry, and attach the relevant scripture proofs. Owen wrote, "The first officer or elder of the church is the *pastor*. A pastor is the elder that feeds and rules the flock, 1 Pet. v. 2; that is, who is its teacher and its bishop: Ποιμάνετε, ἐπισκοποῦντες, 'Feed, taking the oversight'" (16:47).

Owen's explicit definition of pastoral ministry, alongside a single biblical reference, showcased the trajectory Owen would go on to follow as he elaborated on the duties of pastoral ministry.

Owen expanded his former definition, and later presented eleven duties for pastoral ministry in *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*. The eleven duties of pastoral ministry include:

1. Feeding the Flock by the Word of God
2. Fervently Praying for the Flock
3. Administering the Sacraments
4. Faithfully Preserving Christian Teaching
5. Making Converts
6. Strengthening the Saints
7. Suffering with those who Suffer
8. Caring for the Sick and Poor
9. Ruling the Church Well
10. Seeking Godly Fellowship with Like-Minded Churches
11. Living an Exemplary Christian life (16:74–88).

Again, what must be emphasized is Owen's limitation in the aforementioned duties. One cannot presume that Owen is being exhaustive concerning these matters. As he clarified earlier in his work, speaking of these eleven requirements in this manner, "They are but *some*" of the duties required, for a more exhaustive route "would require a large discourse" (16:89). Sadly, he never chose to write a large discourse on the matter. Consequently, any historical theologian seeking to understand Owen's theology of pastoral ministry must assemble the various strands left behind throughout his numerous writings in order to present a faithful tapestry. An examination of each duty will help to present Owen's thinking.

DUTY #1: FEEDING THE FLOCK BY THE WORD OF GOD

Owen was not chiefly concerned with the literal or physical feeding of the people of God in this chief duty. He exhorted his readers to consider the words of the prophet Jeremiah to elucidate this task of feeding, "And I will give you pastors according to mine heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding" (Jer. 3:15; *Works*, 16:74). The task of feeding is inherently tied with dispensing the Word of God. The pastor or shepherd is tasked by God to impart God's divine revelation

2. *Works*, 16:47. Owen will echo this in the subsequent chapter "The especial duty of pastors of churches where he admits his limited scope, "I shall therefore only touch on some things that are of most necessary consideration...." *Works*, 16:74.

to His people by means of proclamation, discipleship, and catechesis. In addition to exhortation, application must be brought forth for the good of each particular congregation (16:53–54). Owen considered this task of feeding as a constant throughout redemptive history, whereby God established His ministers for the good of His people. In considering the new covenant administration of this duty, Owen wrote, “The care of preaching the gospel was committed to Peter, and in him unto all true pastors of the church, under the name of ‘feeding,’ John xxi. 15–17” (16:75).

Certainly the care of Christ’s sheep is a crucial duty, as Owen presented it. The continuous labor of feeding the sheep with the Word of God is important and necessary. However, it is not a bare or mechanical duty, but one rooted in love, as Owen himself articulated in one of his latter works, ΧΡΙΣΤΟΛΟΓΙΑ (1679). It is there that he wrote, “It is a great and blessed duty to feed the sheep and lambs of Christ; yet will not he accept of it unless it proceeds out of love unto his person.... Without this love unto [Christ], he requires of none to feed his sheep, nor will accept of what they pretend to do therein” (1:149). In other words, for any pastor to faithfully accomplish this duty of feeding, it must originate from a heart that loves Christ. The exhortation of a Christ-less pastor can feed Christ’s flock as much as an image of a fruit can feed the stomach.

The task of feeding is *the work* of pastoral ministry for John Owen. He wrote, “This work and duty ... is essential unto the office of a pastor. A man is a pastor unto them whom he feeds by pastoral teaching, and to no more” (16:75). This task is so important in Owen’s mind that a man cannot half-heartedly commit to it. Instead, he must give himself completely over to this task because of how indispensable it is for the vitality of the congregation of Christ. Following the Apostolic model, whereby they committed themselves wholly to the ministry of the Word in Acts 6:1–4, Owen articulated that a minister of the Word must “lay aside all other employments, though lawful ... as would divert him from this work, that he give himself ... [to labour] to the utmost of his ability” (16:75). Nothing can be allowed to distract a pastor from his central work of feeding Christ’s sheep with His Word.

Owen’s historical context must be considered as well in all discussions concerning pastoral ministry. One of the central polemical targets of Owen’s writings is the Church of England. One clear presentation of this polemical aspect comes forward in his elaboration of

“feeding” when he wrote, “some have proceeded so far as to declare that the work of preaching is unnecessary in the church, so to reduce all religion to the reading and rule of the liturgy” (16:75). The historical moment helps to elucidate Owen’s framework in making this duty of feeding as the chief duty amongst the others.

Owen’s great warning for the Church of England is that their rejection of the central pillar of pastoral theology will lead to them rejecting the central object of theology itself: the Lord Jesus Christ. Owen warned, “The next attempt, so far as I know, may be to exclude Christ himself out of their religion; which the denial of a necessity of preaching the gospel makes an entrance into, yea, a good progress towards” (16:75). For Owen the two destructive ends are intimately combined, because they are both expressions of a theological system that inherently rejects the sufficiency of Scripture “to be the rule of faith and life.”³ Thus far, love for Christ has been understood as a necessary feature for the pastor to properly feed the flock, but far more is still required of him.

Owen listed five additional features expected from any man desiring to commit himself to this work of “feeding” the flock of Christ. The first is that such a man must be knowledgeable, and thoroughly acquainted with the Scriptures. Owen explained this requisite skill in this manner, “[Such a man needs] *Spiritual wisdom* and understanding in the mysteries of the gospel, that they may declare unto the church ‘all the counsel of God’ ... see Acts xx. 27; 1 Cor. ii. 4–7; Eph. iii. 8–11” (16:76). If the task of feeding the sheep with the Word of God is so central to pastoral ministry in the mind of Owen, then it is only a man thoroughly acquainted with the Word of God who can hope to execute this task. Owen himself added that a Biblically ignorant pastor “cannot be useful to lead [believers] on to perfection” (16:76). In Owen’s estimation, the cause behind England’s spiritual darkness was directly tied to the lack of faithful and biblical proclamation amongst the churches of his day. For Owen wrote, “And the little care hereof or concernment herein is that which in our days hath rendered the ministry of many fruitless and useless” (16:76). Owen redirected his readers’ attention though from one’s cognitive needs to one’s experiential needs.

The second skill requisite for a gospel preacher to faithfully feed Christ’s flock is “*Experience of the power of the truth* which they preach in and upon their own souls” (16:76). The evidence of the Pharisees, and sadly for ministers in Owen’s own day, made plain that theological information is not directly proportional to one’s love for Christ. Theological education is not equivalent

3. Savoy Declaration 1.3.

to devotion. Owen did not commit himself to an idealistic or merely theoretical conception of pastoral ministry; he had particular ministers in mind. Therefore, what he was writing against were pastors, whose comprehension of Christ and His mysteries had never transformed their hearts. This was exemplified by their daily living. “Without this” Owen wrote, “they will themselves be lifeless and heartless in their own work, and their labour for the most part will be unprofitable towards others” (16:76). For Owen, it is an impossibility that someone can faithfully execute the ministry of feeding the flock with the pure milk of the Gospel, if they are not drinking it in themselves. He believed that the inevitable end of such a minister or ministry was barren and fruitless. Owen used experiential language to help prove his point, “he that doth not feed on ... the food which he provides for others ... knows not but the food he hath provided may be poison” (16:76).

With the very same breath which Owen used to denounce false ministers, he provided godly parameters for those pastors who truly desire to follow Christ’s words. In one of his most epigrammatic moments Owen wrote, “a man preacheth that sermon only well unto others which preacheth itself in his own soul” (16:76). Pastoral ministry cannot be understood as a means for gain, or reputation, as Owen warned against. Fruitful pastoral ministry is the outworking of a heart thoroughly acquainted with the grace of God as given in the Lord Jesus Christ. Consequently, it is only unto those who have experienced the delight of feeding upon Christ’s words that are able to share it with others.

The third and fourth requisite skills required of those who might faithfully dispense the Word are so intertwined that they will here be presented together. The third skill is the “*Skill to divide the word aright*” and the fourth is a “*prudent and diligent consideration of the state of the flock*” (16:76). In *True Nature of a Gospel Church*, Owen wrote briefly about the third skill. However, it is his Hebrews commentary which supplements Owen’s own terse comments by further demonstrating what God demands of a minister of the Word, and his ability to “divide the word aright” (2 Tim. 2:15).

In considering Hebrews 6:1 Owen observed that, “It is the duty of ministers of the gospel to take care, not only that the doctrine they preach be true, but also that it be seasonable with respect unto the state and condition of their hearers” (21:7). When the third and fourth skills are combined, what is presented is a call for wisdom that is two-fold, which reflects the two skills. Owen wrote that to divide God’s Word rightly, “wisdom ... is required” (21:7). However, that proper division of the Word is not

accomplished in a vacuum, but in light of the particular congregation to which one is called.

Owen himself combined both the third and fourth skills in his explication of Hebrews 6:1. Just as Owen utilized 2 Timothy 2:15 in a *True Nature of a Gospel Church* to prove the third skill, he again referred to that same Scriptural reference in his discourse in Hebrews 6:1 to illuminate for his readership what is the task of the pastor. Owen wrote, “It is, therefore, the duty of stewards in the house of God to give unto his household their proper portion. This is the blessed advice our apostle gives to Timothy, 2 Tim. ii.15” (21:7). The combination of both duties is illustrated for Owen’s readers again in his Hebrews discourse by means of looking at the priestly work. Owen wrote, “the priest ... [dispensed the sacrifice] unto the altar, himself, and them that brought them ... so he give out a due and proper part unto his hearers” (21:7).

Wisdom is necessary both in division of the Word and the application of the Word. Owen warned that should a pastor engage in feeding the mature in Christ as if they were spiritual babes, or treating spiritual infants as if they were mature, the end would be the same, “[it would] at length make them weary of the ordinance itself” (21:7). According to Owen, pastoral ministry requires spiritual finesse, so that dexterity and wisdom are so wed that Christ’s church may be well fed.

Returning to *True Nature of a Gospel Church*, the fifth requisite skill of feeding the flock of Christ is “*zeal for the glory of God and compassion for the souls of men*” (16:77). Everything Owen has provided thus far concerning the skills tied to faithfully feeding the flock of Christ has been to some degree or another a manifestation of one’s interaction with the Scriptures. For example, if the four preceding skills are reworded according to their function, they would proceed as follows:

1. Know the Word.
2. Experience the Word.
3. Properly Divide the Word.
4. Carefully Administer the Word.

With Owen’s final recommendation, the last skill evidences a shift of focus, from the Word itself to one’s own heart. Owen himself paused in his deviation to highlight that this fifth skill is the very “life and soul of preaching” (16:77).

The fifth skill is “*zeal for the glory of God and compassion for the souls of men*” (16:77). In other words, if a pastor does not exemplify zeal for God, or compassion for sinners, whatever follows from their life—whether

it be preaching, or teaching, or catechesis—none of it is truly alive or better said, life-giving. He may be able to bring forth the visible realities of pastoral ministry, however, that which is presented is lifeless, and likely to cause decay.

When Owen concluded his section on the five requisite skills for feeding the flock, he considered his formulations apparent and obvious. Nevertheless, it is these apparent and obvious ideas which had been lacking in the ministry of some in his own estimation. Owen wrote “the ruin of the ministry of the most for the want of [these skills], or from notable defects in them, is or may be no less evidently known” (16:77). Owen’s writing concerning these five skills is not exhaustive, nor should it be viewed as such. He concluded his section by reminding his readers of the limited scope of his present work: “the very naming of them (which is all at present which I design)” (16:77). However, what is not limited for Owen is that the previously mentioned “naming” makes plain that the task of pastoral ministry is both costly and demanding, something Owen knew experientially himself.

Looking to the Apostle Paul, Owen admitted that a due consideration of the skills and tasks ought to cause every minister to tremble and cry aloud [2 Cor. 2:16]. Nevertheless, Owen did not leave his readers with merely a list of duties, or with the overwhelming reality of the task. He pastored the pastors and commended them when he said, “the consideration of [these skills and duties] is sufficient to stir up all ministers unto fervent prayer for supplies of divine aid and assistance for that work which in their own strength they can no way answer” (16:77). What ministers need is divine help. Anything short of that, Owen said, will fail to enable them to accomplish their divine mission.

DUTY #2: FERVENTLY PRAYING FOR THE FLOCK

Returning the Apostolic model for pastoral ministry, Owen pointed his readers back to Acts 6:4. There Luke wrote these words of the Apostles, “But we will give ourselves continually to prayer.” With his closing comments on the first duty of pastoral ministry, a natural bridge is found for the second duty, when he highlighted the centrality of prayer. Echoing his comments from before, Owen wrote, “Without [prayer], no man can or doth preach to them as he ought, nor perform any other duty of his pastoral office” (16:77). Prayer was the vital link for Owen between the minister and the Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. Without this necessary communion with God everything that

flows from a minister’s efforts must be seen as futile or profitless. For prayerless ministry is rooted in self-sufficiency, and not upon Christ. Owen warned his readers, “whatever is done without . . . constant prayer for the church . . . is of no esteem in the sight of Jesus Christ” (16:78). In Owen’s structure, preaching without prayer is profitless.

Owen’s call to fervent prayer found at least five goals to spur the minister into carefully committing himself unto the duty. In a word, Owen provided what he believed to be a broad guide in how ministers ought to pray for their congregations. Again, the limited scope of this project must be pointed out continually. The minister’s guide for prayer is as follows:

1. Pray for “*the success of the word.*”
2. Pray for “*the temptations that the church is generally exposed unto.*”
3. Pray for “*the especial state and condition of all the members.*”
4. Pray for “*the presence of Christ in the assemblies of the church.*”
5. Pray for “[*the church’s*] *preservation in faith, love, and fruitfulness*” (16:78).

Prayer is the very lifeblood of pastoral ministry for John Owen. Just as the ministers of the Word must execute wisdom, and constant diligence in their considerations of the Word of God, so their prayers must be fervent and widespread for the good of their congregation. Owen noted that these prayers for Christ’s church must not be occasional or seasonal but be considered “in their daily pastoral supplications” (16:78). Owen’s concern for prayer in pastoral ministry may equal his concern for a proper place of dividing the Word of God. Prayer is the means by which a minister is “more filled with love” for their congregations (16:79). Owen has given his readers much to consider already, but he showed his pastoral heart most clearly when he invited ministers to pray chiefly to be a blessing to their people. Prayer is, according to Owen, “the only instituted way whereby [pastors] may, by virtue of their office, bless their congregations” (16:78–79). Rather than being solely a means towards enabling a minister to accomplish his tasks, prayer becomes a chief means of constantly caring for the flock of Christ which has been committed to the minister’s care. In a very real sense, prayer is a chief means of shepherding the flock of Christ.

DUTY #3: ADMINISTERING THE SACRAMENTS

Owen's sacramental theology bursts forth in this third duty. He provided what he believed to be a succinct definition for the function of these signs and "seals of the covenant" (16:79). Owen wrote, "their principal end is the peculiar confirmation and application of the word preached." The sacraments are unable to birth faith in the hearts of those members of the flock, but its function, as is typical of Reformed confessional theology, provides a strengthening or confirmatory component for the believer.⁴ Owen's own sacramental theology sought a weekly participation of the Lord's Supper, but his desire to honor the liberty of each congregation did not allow him to make his desires the standard. Instead, he pointed his readers to consider that, "It is the duty of pastors to consider all the necessary circumstances of their administration, as unto time, place, frequency, order, and decency" (16:79).

Owen highlighted the importance of the sacraments in terms of a congregation's freedom in establishing circumstantial parameters. He was also guarding against what he considered the "uninstituted rites and ceremonies" of both the Church of England the Church of Rome (16:79). For Owen, pastors are not to find the beauty of the sacramental participation in the outward garb, or religious genuflections, but in the purposeful submission to what Christ demanded of His churches. For Owen, any deviation from the simplicity of Christ's institution will inevitably lead to idolatry. Instead, what Owen posited as a faithful alternative is that pastors ought to demonstrate "express obedience unto his authority" by means of honoring Christ's explicit commands from Scripture (16:79). Nevertheless, more is required of Christ's under-shepherds in order to honor Christ. The sacraments must not be dispensed without consideration of the recipient. The Lord's Table and Holy Baptism are not universal gifts without requirements. Instead, there are parameters that must be met in order for their proper utilization amongst the people of God. Consequently, it is the pastor's duty to determine, "according unto the rule of the gospel" whether such individuals are "meet and worthy" of taking "these holy things" (16:79).

Though this section is chiefly concerned with a proper administration of the sacraments, Owen's own ecclesiological considerations concerning polity do come forward. They do so because of how they impact the outworking of the gospel ordinances, which he listed as preaching, and the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper (16:80). He limited these ordinances to the teaching officers of the church. Owen considered the

officers of the church, and particularly in this instance, the teaching officers, as those alone whom Christ has gifted as His authoritative stewards bearing the right to represent Him to the congregation. By means of these gospel ordinances, Christ feeds His flock. Owen concluded this matter by alluding to some of his favorite texts in demonstrating the work of a pastor: Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2. Both passages of Scripture regularly undergird Owen's pastoral formulations. Following a short excursus on ordination, Owen progressed forward to his fourth duty.

DUTY #4: FAITHFULLY PRESERVING CHRISTIAN TEACHING

The pastors are etched as sentinels of the Word of God and the doctrines which pour forth from the Scriptures. Here Owen looked chiefly at the wisdom of the Apostle Paul, who exhorted Timothy towards this "one principal end of the ministry," which has now been conveyed unto all pastors (16:81). Owen highlighted this when he wrote, "What [Paul] says of [Timothy] ... is true of all pastors of churches, according to their measure and call" (16:81). Though elsewhere, Owen alluded to Timothy's office as extraordinary, namely that of an evangelist, he finds a paradigmatic call to duty in Timothy which must be taken up throughout the ages by every subsequent pastor.

The absence of this duty in preserving Christian doctrine, in Owen's estimation, has been the greatest cause of heresy and schism. Where God's Word is given little estimation, where it is considered inconsequential, where the deposit of truth is forgotten—how can aberrations not come forward? All of this is very clear in Owen's mind. Amid Owen's warnings against any laxity towards this particular duty, he provided a piece of social commentary into his own world. Owen welcomed his readers to consider the present socio-religious landscape (c. 1681) to prove his point. "Wherefore this duty," Owen wrote "*especially at this time*, when the fundamental truths of the gospel are on all sides impugned ... is in an especial manner to be attended unto" (16:82; emphasis added). If true, then it is the constant consideration of these heretical movements and the duty of a minister to contend for the truth that fueled Owen's own writing, even as he was riddled with sickness in his last days. The question of method inevitably comes forward for consideration in preserving the truth of the Gospel.

4. For examples please see: Belgic Confession Art. 33; Heidelberg Catechism Q. & A. 65, 66; Westminster Confession of Faith Ch. 27.

A minister is called and duty-bound to preserve the doctrines of the church. Owen provided seven ways in which this mission was to be accomplished. Firstly, a pastor must know what he is talking about; Owen never presumes the obvious. He wrote, “Men cannot preserve that for others which they are ignorant of themselves” (16:82). Pastors must know what they are preserving if they are to preserve it. Owen instructed ministers that the key step towards preservation is knowledge, for he warned that the Scylla and Charybdis of this duty is weakness and wickedness, both being catastrophic to the preservation of the truth.

The second manner of preservation comes in by means of the heart. Owen reminded his readers that it is not difficult to guard what you love. Owen wrote, “Unless we look on truth as a pearl, as that which is valued at any rate . . . which is better than all the world, we shall not endeavour its preservation” (16:82). Again, readers are drawn to consider Owen’s historical moment. Owen did not write these words without a point of reference. He had endured the Great Ejection of August 24, 1662, though he himself was not ejected. In his world, he faithfully contended for the truth and preserved it, even at great cost to himself in terms of positions, and even the joy of living peaceably with his family. His family was separated for the sake of protection at various times and for diverse periods. He provided this rare glimpse into his world when he wrote, “Some are ready to part with truth at an easy rate, or to grow indifferent about it; whereof we have multitudes of examples *in the days wherein we live*” (16:82; emphasis added). Beyond these individuals, Owen implicitly hearkened his readers to consider England’s own Oxford Martyrs: Thomas Cranmer, Nicholas Ridley, and Hugh Latimer. Owen made clear that these men were in view as he concluded his note by commenting on how their heirs have shamed their forefathers and “pretend to succeed them in their profession” (16:82; emphasis added). In effect, with Owen’s own comments his readership is provided with a glimpse into what drove him in these moments; namely, a love for the truth.

The third manner of preservation comes in by means of wisdom: don’t entertain foolish opinions. Owen’s terseness may be viewed stylistically as a model of applying this particular manner. In other words, be short and to the point with foolish opinions which “have caused no small trouble and damage unto the church” (16:82).

The fourth manner of preservation is also an outworking of wisdom from the mind of the pastor. To maintain the truth, a minister must have sufficient “*Learning and ability of mind to discern and disprove*

the oppositions of the adversaries of the truth” (16:82). Knowing the truth is not the same as refuting error. Owen was calling pastors to actively engage in polemical contexts to push back against the delusions of heretics and schismatics. He found two appropriate ends of such actions: 1. To silence the mouths of liars; 2. To convince others of the truth. A pastor is not allowed to simply draw in the vast libraries of theology, but must unleash them rigorously against turbulent deceptions as they bombard the churches.

Owen progressively shortened his expansions concerning the last three manners of preservation. He listed them rather succinctly. The fifth manner of preservation required a consistent confirming of “the most important truths of the gospel” (16:82). The sixth manner of preservation is a steady watch of the shepherds over their flocks from dangers within or without. Lastly, the seventh manner of preservation is a rigorously connectional congregationalism, “*A concurrent assistance with the elders and messengers of other churches with whom they are in communion, in the declaration of the faith which they all profess*” (16:82). The work of preserving God’s people is bigger than any single congregation can handle, and is reflective of the need for pastors to walk alongside other like-minded godly elders in ministry. This last note does well to highlight the connectional dynamic even within Congregationalism. Things are not so Independent after all.

DUTY #5: MAKING CONVERTS

Owen continued his examination of the nature of pastoral ministry in talking about the necessity of pursuing converts to the Gospel. He expressed this most central task in this way, “one of the principal ends of the institution [of the church] and preservation of churches is the conversion of souls” (16:83). Pastors do require sheep to feed in order to exercise their duty. Whether Owen allowed his eschatological viewpoint to bleed through in the next exchange, or was merely speaking in rhetorical superlatives, he concluded that central thesis with these words, “when there are no more to be converted, there shall be no more church on the earth” (16:83). Regardless of the angle, what Owen wished to communicate was clear: a pastor must always busy himself with seeking out the unconverted, that they might be united to Christ the Lord.

Owen provided the functional dynamic of the church “that God designs” for his readers under these three heads:

1. The church exists “to enlarge the kingdom of Christ.”
2. The church exists “to diffuse the light and savour of the gospel.”
3. The church exists “to be subservient unto the calling ... [and] gathering all the sheep of Christ into his fold” (16:83).

The three heads combine as one in function, much like the distinct points of a triquetras, depicting altogether the single pastoral duty of conversion.

Just as Owen had a clear destination in matters of conversion, he likewise had a clear path in ascertaining that goal: conversion is effected by means of preaching. Owen wrote, “the principal instrumental cause of all these is the preaching of the word; and this is committed unto the pastors of the churches” (16:82). The initial duty of “feeding the sheep” indeed shows itself again to be the chief duty under which each successive aspect comes forth. However, it is a feeding of the sheep towards a particular end.

Preaching for Owen is the key to pastoral ministry, which cannot be relegated to a secondary position, nor can it be performed by any person indiscriminately. As Owen will subsequently write in his Hebrews commentary, “God graciously ordered that the word of the gospel shall be preached unto men; whereon depends their welfare or their ruin” (20:245). Nevertheless, Owen recognized that there are anomalies within the realm of redemptive history. Though he treasures the uniqueness of the ordinary office of pastor, he still allows for those outside of ordained ministry to play an instrumental role in conversion, including “the necessary occasional teaching of women” (16:83). Rather, than being a call for some anachronistic proto-feminism amongst the Oxford giant, it seems that Owen was merely willing to note what has occurred in history descriptively, and is not speaking prescriptively.

Preaching, for Owen, must have a definitive target, and his first is the unconverted world. Owen’s aim is in following the apostolic example, whilst simultaneously eschewing from commingling the extraordinary and ordinary offices together. However, it is from the work of the apostles that Owen gathers his pastoral paradigm for conversion. The apostolic work is principally about the conversion of lost men and women unto the cause of Christ. Owen wrote, “this was their principal work, as Paul testifieth, 1 Cor. i. 17” (16:83). Around the same time *True Nature of a Gospel Work* was penned, Owen again would take up this very same passage towards this same end in an ordination sermon delivered on September 8,

1682. There he wrote, “*The first work* committed to the apostles was the convincing and converting sinners to Christ among Jews and Gentiles,—to preach the gospel, to convert infidels;—this they accounted their chief work” (9:460–461). Though Owen argued in that same sermon for a methodological discontinuity between pastors and apostles, their work nevertheless remained the same for “preaching was their chief work” (9:461).

After concerning themselves with preaching to the unconverted, preachers found their second target amongst the converted. To those individuals who had already been procured to the cause of Christ, Owen understood the role of preaching to function towards their growth in sanctification. The method of accomplishing this goal was to utilize the structure of corporate worship whereby pastors and teachers would instruct the converted “to do and observe all things appointed by [the Lord Jesus Christ]” (16:84). For it is within corporate worship, that Owen identifies a constant platform for the unconverted to be present and subsequently converted. In addition, Owen granted that there may be other instances whereby a minister may preach in settings outside of his own pulpit to the edification of “the church catholic” (16:84–85). Owen made allowance in pastoral ministry for a minister to both care for their congregations, while allowing for preaching in different settings as providence guided. He felt so strongly about this matter that he again provided an accidental glimmer of himself as he wrote, “if I did not think myself bound to preach ... as a minister authorized in all places and on all occasions, when I am called ... I think I should never preach much more in this world” (16:85). Owen was compelled to preach, following his own internal sense of calling as a minister of the Word, and the freedom Christ has allowed for his ministers to preach beyond their own pulpits.

DUTY #6: STRENGTHENING THE SAINTS

In short, this pastoral duty may best be summarized under the broad heading of soul-care. Owen elaborated, “[It belongs unto pastors] to be *ready, willing, and able, to comfort, relieve, and refresh, those that are tempted, tossed, wearied with fears and grounds of disconsolation, in times of trial and desertion*” (16:85). One need only think about the context of Owen’s last twenty years of ministry to see this would have been one of his central duties as he labored as a pastor.

Owen, however, was unabashedly unoriginal in establishing this duty, for he found his paragon in the Lord Jesus Christ. Owen alluded to Christ in his comments

on Hebrews 4:15. There it is written, “For we have not an high priest which cannot be *touched* with the feelings of our infirmities.” (Heb 4:15) For Owen, the way this verse evidenced itself in the life of Christ is most remarkable. Owen’s comments, “[Jesus] is deeply concerned in all our infirmities, sorrows, and sufferings” (20:420). When a reader begins to contemplate the tragedy of Owen’s life, as a minister, and especially as a family man, his sentence about Christ’s priestly concern takes on a new dimension. The loss of Owen’s children and wife are not static memories, but bear a substantial weight as he elaborated on the deep pastoral soul-care of Christ, and his extension into the present by means of pastors. To be a pastor then, in Owen’s scheme, is to participate in the suffering of Christ for His people. By necessity the inverse would also be correct, that a pastor who remained unmoved, unconcerned, and indifferent about the suffering of his sheep was a pastor in name alone.

Returning to Hebrews, it was in Owen’s elaboration of Christ’s being “touched” by His people’s weaknesses which led to action. Owen continued, “This [deep concern] is attended with an inclination and propensity to relieve us ... he hath a real motion of affections in his holy nature” (20:420–421). Building on Christ the archetype, Owen pointed subsequent ministers to follow suit. Owen wrote, “those who have the charge of his flock under him ought to have a sense of their infirmities, and endeavour in an especial manner to succor them that are tempted” (16:85). All of these threads come together to form the mantle of pastoral ministry with the union of each subsequent duty.

Owen does not leave this task under broad sensibilities, but placed them under three heads to represent the way soul-care is to be accomplished. The first is that a minister needs “To be able *rightly to understand the various cases that will occur of this kind*” (16:86). The first manner of soul-care may come across generically, but the concept is simple: know what to say, and when to say it. In short, Owen was recommending that ministers must be willing to counsel their people. Ministers must labor to diligently care for each sheep, and not presume that every case requires the same remedy. Instead, soul-care requires diligence and patience to both discern the evil at work and “with wisdom to make application ... [and offer] fit medicines and remedies unto every sore and distemper” (16:86). As expected, the sort of pastoral work Owen is commending unto his readers required time, skill, and a willingness to pursue Christ’s lost sheep. Owen recognized that ministers have not unanimously celebrated this expectation of pastoral

duty. Owen wrote, “These things are by some despised, by some neglected, by some looked after only in stated cases of conscience” (16:86). Beyond this brief note on the estate of ministers in Owen’s day, what is provided are Owen’s five recommendations in how ministers who desire to grow in soul-care may accomplish their goals. The following skills are so necessary for pastoral ministry that Owen warned, “without these things, all pretences unto this ability and duty ... are vain” (16:86). The five recommendations are as follows:

1. “By diligent study of the Scriptures.”
2. By “meditation” upon the Scriptures.
3. By “fervent prayer.”
4. “[B]y experience of spiritual things.”
5. By “temptations in their own souls” (16:86).

The common thread amongst the five recommendations requires a fervent and diligent exercise of communion with God, and the examination of one’s own soul. Apart from these things a minister is unable to help the needs of his congregation. Though brief, Owen provided another quick comment which highlighted his own succinct social commentary on the laziness of those pastors of his own day. After listing the danger of attempting soul-care without these five elements Owen commented, “whence it is that the whole work of it is much neglected” (16:86). How can a minister expect to succeed in rightly understanding the hearts of those distressed members, if such a minister is wholly unacquainted with the Word of God? How can he hope to guide his members from the distress of their sins if the minister himself is abiding in his own strength rather than God’s as expressed by his prayerlessness? How can he hope to lead his members into victory over their battles with temptations if the minister himself has given no thought to conquering his own? The necessity of the experiential reality for pastoral ministry cannot be understated in Owen’s practical divinity.

The second manner by which soul-care must be accomplished in Owen’s scheme requires ministers, “To be ready and willing to *attend unto the especial cases that may be brought unto them*, and not to look on them as unnecessary diversions” (16:87). Christ’s archetypal function cannot be overplayed in this manner of soul-care. The question Owen implicitly raised to his readers is this: How can anyone claim to be a minister of Christ who is unwilling to minister *as* Christ did? Again, the methodological distinctions between Christ and the Apostles cannot be pursued by the ordinary office of pastor. However, the continuity of manner in soul-care

does exist between the two orders. Owen turns to the prophet Isaiah, where again, what is presented under the one duty of pastoral ministry is absorbed again under the broad head of “feeding” Christ’s sheep. “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd” Isaiah wrote, “he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry *them* in his bosom, *and* shall gently lead those that are with young.” (Isa 40:11) A pastor provides soul-care to Christ’s flock by carefully attending to those sheep whose consciences are brought down by sin, or are pursuing satanic ends. To follow the ministry of Christ, an end for which every pastor ought to pursue, necessitates a minister “to seek them out, and to give them their counsel and direction on all occasions” (16:87). In doing so, ministers are reflecting the ministry of Christ who came “to seek and to save that which was lost.” (Luke 19:10)

The third and last manner by which soul-care is to be accomplished according to Owen is by the pastors of Christ’s church learning “*To bear patiently and tenderly with the weakness, ignorance, dullness, slowness to believe and receive satisfaction ... in them that are so tempted*” (16:87). Again Christ’s priestly character comes forward as the archetype for this skill, as it has been for the former two. Owen’s writings on soul-care reveal that Christ must be the chief end, and goal for those who minister, and those unto whom a minister ministers. Owen was concerned with the way a pastor cares for the flock, and provided a serious warning towards this aspect of soul-care. Owen warned, “if much patience, meekness, and condescension, be not exercised towards them, they are quickly turned out of the way [of Christ]” (16:87). Pastoral sensitivity is not optional for the minister of Christ’s church. Unless a pastor commit himself to patience, gentleness, and meeting people where they are, his ministry will be short-lived, for he will turn many away from the congregation. For the model is Christ, and in Owen’s estimation this may reflect one of the most important aspects of all pastoral ministry. For Owen wrote, “In the discharge of the whole pastoral office, there is not any thing or duty that is of more importance, nor wherein the Lord Jesus Christ is more concerned ... than this is” (16:87). To abide in caring patiently and meekly for the souls of the congregation, is to abide in the shadow of the chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus. After a terse comment against the Roman Catholic practice of private or “auricular confession” as a cheap and vain outworking of soul-care which leads to “the promotion of their own ease, wealth, [and] authority,” Owen led his readers to the seventh duty of pastoral ministry in practice (16:87).

DUTY #7: SUFFERING WITH THOSE WHO SUFFER

A natural way to follow the former duty of soul-care for a minister is to enter into the suffering of those in his congregation. Owen identified his seventh duty as “*A compassionate suffering with all the members of the church in all their trials and troubles, whether internal or external*” (16:87). Pastors who are unwilling to suffer with their people, are failing to exercise their office well. As Owen’s duties continued to unfold, the underlying foundation of Christ as archetypal in every aspect of ministry comes forward again. Owen highlighted the archetypal/eotypal relationship between Christ and minister when he wrote, “nor is there any thing that renders them more like unto Jesus Christ, whom to represent unto the church is their principal duty” (16:87). If it is true that a minister’s chief aim is to reflect Christ unto the congregation, what could be more Christ-like than to “be touched with the feeling of [the church’s] infirmities”? (Heb 4:15)

The importance of this empathetic reality is that it is inherently a fountain of consolation and comfort to the people of God. Owen also considered the words of the Apostle Paul from 2 Corinthians 11: 29 as a guide, “Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not?” These words of the Apostle appear only in one other place in Owen’s writings, *Eschol; A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan* (1647). Under the eighth rule of fellowship, Owen marked 2 Corinthians 11:29 to highlight the interpenetration of the lives of the saints in Christ’s congregation. He warned the people of Coggeshall in Essex, to whom he originally penned these words, “It is a rotten member which is not affected with the anguish of its companions” (13:73). If such a thing can rightly be said of the relationship between member and member, how much more must it be the case for a pastor and his members? Owen’s warnings there unto members comes doubly upon ministers, “They are marked particularly for destruction who, in the midst of plentiful enjoyments, forget the miseries of their brethren” (13:73). Indifference has no place in the church of Christ, not amongst the laity, especially not amongst its clergy. Over thirty years later, Owen’s opinions did not change on the matter. Instead, a line of continuity pushed itself forward as he wrote, “unless this compassion and goodness do run through the discharge of their whole office, men cannot be said to be evangelical shepherds, nor the sheep said in any sense to be their own.” (16:87–88). A relationship may exist between minister and people if the shepherd remains emotionally removed from the needs of his flock,

however such a relationship is anything but pastoral, and least of all Christ-like.

DUTY #8: CARING FOR THE SICK AND THE POOR

Thus far in the examination of the pastoral theology of John Owen, a lengthy explication has subsequently followed each declaration of pastoral duties. However, Duty #8 contains only one comment from Pastor Owen and so it shall be quoted in full, “*Care of the poor and visitation of the sick* are parts of this duty, commonly known, though commonly neglected” (16:88). Perhaps Owen treated this duty so succinctly because it was chiefly under the auspices of the work of the diaconate. As Owen later wrote, “deacons [were] ordained to *take care of the poor*” (16:104; emphasis added). Elsewhere Owen wrote, “The *care of the poor of the flock* belongs also the pastoral office, yet is there another officer appointed to attend unto it” (16:128). Owen’s brevity in this pastoral duty may be because this responsibility does not chiefly fall on the pastor, though he is indeed taken up in it. As Owen even expressed in an ordination sermon, “a ‘deacon,’ ... signifies any minister or servant: and it hath a special signification, when it denotes that *peculiar officer* which was instituted in the church to *take care of the poor*” (9:452). In short, the minister of Christ’s church is called in conjunction with the deacons to care for those impoverished individuals who struggle to care for themselves and their families.

The visitation of the sick is not as well attested to as the care for the poor in the writings of Owen. In Owen’s *The Doctrine of Justification By Faith* (1677) one finds another comment by Owen on the visitation of the sick. In seeing himself as a faithful arbiter of the Western catholic tradition, Owen has no issue in this portion of his writing in utilizing Jerome, Ambrose, and Anselm of Canterbury to prove the nature of Christ’s sufficiency as the perfect substitute for the atonement of Christ’s people. However, in the midst of arguing for justification by faith alone in Christ alone, Owen appropriated Anselm’s historic guide in caring for the sick, which included a penetrating examination of the soul of the ill. Owen echoed these words of Anselm which is quoted at length for the reader’s benefit:

Does thou believe that thou canst not be saved but by the death of Christ? The sick man answereth, ‘Yes;’ then let it be said unto him, Go to, then, and whilst thy soul abideth in thee, put all thy confidence in this death alone, place thy trust in no other thing; commit thyself wholly to this death, cover thyself wholly with this

alone, cast thyself wholly on this death, wrap thyself wholly in this death. And if God would judge thee, say, ‘Lord, I place the death of our Lord Jesus Christ between me and thy judgement (*Works*, 5:17).

Owen’s appropriation of this historical glimpse into medieval pastoral practice provided in brief what visitation with the sick ought to look like descriptively. By virtue of his office, a minister examines the spiritual estate of the sick, and guides them to consider no other comfort than the substitutionary work of the Lord Jesus Christ on their behalf. In other words, the visitation of the sick necessarily involves a pastoral imploring of the sick to be made right with Christ and in finding one’s deepest consolation only in Him. This is a pastor’s solemn duty in preparing a soul to meet Christ.

DUTY #9: RULING THE CHURCH WELL

The sacred duty of ruling Christ’s sheep comes under the auspices of both teaching and ruling elders. Owen’s succinct comments in chapter 5 of *True Nature of a Gospel Church* are not meant to diminish the task, as much as to highlight that this a shared task for the pastor. Much like the duty of caring for the sick and the poor is a task upheld by the deacons primarily, though assisted by the pastor, so in the same way the exercise of ruling the church is shared by an additional officer: the ruling elder. Owen redirected his readers towards his subsequent chapters of *True Nature of a Gospel Church* on the office of a ruling elder, and the nature of that elder’s work to help clarify his thoughts.

The simplest expression of his understanding of church rule can be condensed to one of his initial sentences in chapter 7 “Of the rule of the church, or of ruling elders.” There Owen wrote, “The rule and government of the church, or *the execution of the authority of Christ* therein, is in the hand of the elders ... none have rule in the church but elders” (16:106). What Owen was trying to demonstrate to his readers was a lucid presentation of that apostolic tradition codified in the Scriptures, which allows church authority only amongst the elders. Again, Owen placed both pastors and elders under the single umbrella of elders. The former category is a teaching elder, the latter a ruling elder. He looked to the apostles, as a guide for his structures, considering chiefly the fact that they “were elders also, 1 Pet. v. 1; 2 John 1; 3 John 1. See Acts xxi. 18; 1 Tim. v. 17” (16:106). In sum, for Owen every portion of church power which governs the people of God, comes by means of the elders alone.

Owen's division of the use of church rule is divided by what he calls the "key of order" and the key of "jurisdiction" (16:106). The former is a valid exercise of the rule and authority which Christ Himself has imparted for the benefit of His church. Owen described the "key of order" as "the *spiritual right, power, and authority of bishops or pastors to preach the word, to administer the sacraments, and doctrinally to bind and loose the consciences of men*" (16:106). However, this positive presentation stood opposed to the latter, the "key of jurisdiction." Owen revealed his opinion on the matter without hesitation when he wrote "By 'jurisdiction,' *the rule, government, or discipline of the church is designed; though it was never so called or esteemed in the Scripture, or the primitive church*" (16:106). The central complaint was simply that the ecclesiological structures at work in Owen's day appeared to him as a radical departure from the Apostolic model, and the ancient church. For Owen, there was no argument from Scripture, or the ancient church, for anyone to have the right to preach and administer the sacraments, but not bear the power to rule over the church. Such a false bifurcation of the work of the elder is tantamount to rejecting the authority of Christ in Owen's theological scheme.

Owen's historical moment, as he penned *True Nature of a Gospel Church* during the Restoration era of England, allowed him to juxtapose his understanding of the apostolic model for ecclesiology in comparison with what has been proposed by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. Remembering again, that *True Nature of a Gospel Church* was written as a response against Edward Stillingfleet's, *The Unreasonableness of Separation* (1681) helps to position these comments appropriately against the Church of England in particular, and hierarchical polity at large. What adds to the insult is of course his positioning of England alongside Rome in his barrage against what he deemed as a false usurpation of church power and rule. The rhetorical connections cannot be missed without bypassing some of the implications of Owen's assessment of England's trajectory. Owen himself as a younger man saw how easy it was for the Romanization of the Church of England under Archbishop William Laud. Those memories likely resounded within him, as he considered the abuse and overstepping of church authority, in addition to all that he had observed and experienced himself following the Great Ejection on Black Bartholomew's Day.

In contemplating the work of rule in the church itself, Owen highlighted the complementary nature of governing Christ's church. The tightrope that Owen walked was

simultaneously presenting the necessity and uniqueness of ruling elders, whilst not divesting teaching elders of their call to rule as well. Owen's recognition of his historical moment guided the nuanced layers of his language. He must emphasize the necessity of ruling elders, because of their purposeful absence in the Church of England and of Rome. He found their absence not only as a rejection of the church order instituted by Christ Himself, but inevitably leading towards a deficiency for the life of the church. No single man has all the requisite gifts for caring for Christ's flock. Owen illustrated this point when he wrote, "Some men are fitted by gifts for the dispensation of the word ... who have no useful ability for the work of rule ... it is very seldom that both ... gifts ... concur ... in the same person" (16:109). The reality of gifting is always at the forefront of Owen's conversations of church officers. Officers are not made *de facto* from their ordination. Officers are made by the especial gifting of the Holy Spirit for that task, and are identified and set apart for that work in ordination. Owen's remarks on gifts therefore are simply a recognition for what is obvious to him, and which he assumed was obvious to others: no one has all the necessary gifts to care for Christ's congregation. Even pastors need help.

Ruling elders provide the assistance which pastors need. In addition, as Owen defined the unique work of the ruling elder, he simultaneously displayed what he believed to be the prescribed overseeing work required for pastors. Owen elaborated that a teaching and ruling elder must accomplish together the task of overseeing Christ's church. Owen wrote, "The work of rule [is] ... to watch over the walking or conversation of the members of the church *with authority*, exhorting, comforting, admonishing, reproving, encouraging, direction of them" (16:109; emphasis added). Elsewhere, Owen added, "elders are to take care of the walk or conversation of all the members of the church, that it be according unto the rule of the gospel" (16:114). For all intents and purposes the work of the ruling elder echoed much of the shepherding task of teaching elders. It involved the careful observation, examination, and care of the flock of Christ. Both men are simultaneously called to this work. Therefore, Owen's definition for the overseeing work of the ruling elder serves as a definition for the overseeing work of the pastor: the teaching elder.

As mentioned, Owen's presentation of the necessity of the ruling elder, and even elaborating the unique gifting for its accomplishment, does not preclude the rule of a teaching elder. A pastor is still required by God, according to Owen, to oversee the flock and accomplish these same ends. Owen guarded this aspect of pastoral

ministry as he wrote, “It doth not hence follow that ... pastors and teachers, who are elders also, are *divested of the right of rule in the church, or discharged from the exercise of it*” (16:111). Ruling elders are set apart by the Holy Spirit for the great benefit of the pastor in helping him to care for Christ’s flock. Nevertheless, a pastor never ceases to bear the weighty responsibility of overseeing Christ’s flock, nor is their authority at any point hindered by the addition of the ruling elder. Both men are presbyters and “the right and duty of rule is inseparable from the office of elders, which all bishops or pastors are” (16:111). Owen brandished the parity of these offices. Both men work simultaneously together for the good of the congregation. In Owen’s ecclesiology, pastors are not called to function as a diocesan bishop over the elders. Equally true is the fact that the ruling elders, in turn, may not function in such a manner over the pastor.

Shifting from Owen’s ideal to Owen’s context, it was his consideration of the pastoral duty of ruling Christ’s church well which undergirded Owen’s ecclesiological critiques of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. Owen did not limit his sights there however, but even critiqued other Independent congregations who improperly placed the power of the keys in the congregants at large. Owen has already articulated the parity of the elder, and that any claim of usurping authority above the presbytery (in a congregational sense) has no bearing. Owen’s congregationalism, however, was not a bare democratic rule. Rather than claim that the keys of the kingdom were granted unto all the members indistinguishably, he assigned them to the teaching and ruling elders *alone*. Concerning those Independent bodies which are “absolutely *democratical or popular*,” Owen found a rejection of Christ’s order in practice, by virtue of removing the need for elders at all (16:112). In such a scheme, both pastor and elders rule solely by the consent of the congregation at large. They are not truly vested with the authority which would allow them to lead the congregation. Owen’s conclusion on the pragmatic ends of this form of congregationalism led by necessity to his conclusion, “On this principle and supposition, I see no necessity for any elders at all” (16:112). One’s ecclesiological commitments have pragmatic ramifications for the well-being of the church. For Owen, ruling elders are unable to accomplish their God-ordained roles properly in every ecclesiological mold, and in turn the pastors may become hindered as well.

Owen is unabashedly committed to the plurality of elders guiding and ruling the local church. According

to Owen, single-elder congregations which have the pastor as the sole elder held to a “novel opinion, contradictory to the sense and practice of the church in all ages” (16:113). The ground to his objections was rooted in his exegetical conclusions as well as his pragmatic observations.

Firstly, Owen’s reading of Acts always found the Apostles establishing congregations under the oversight of a plurality of elders. Owen’s consistent commitment was to follow in the footsteps of the Apostles as revealed in the Bible. Owen echoed his guiding principle when he wrote, “it is our duty to imitate and follow [the apostles] as our rule” (16:113).

Secondly, Owen was concerned that each particular congregation have a presbytery. Again, in this instance a presbytery is that council which is comprised of pastor(s) and ruling elders of a particular congregation.

Thirdly, pragmatic concerns arose when only one elder existed in a congregation. For example, what should a congregation do if the sole elder should die or vacate the pulpit? Owen’s regular abiding concern in matters of congregational care was to avoid that which was “irregular” and “defective” in matters of “church-order” (16:114).

Fourthly, with a single-elder model there are two dangers which inevitably arise: 1) The elder may function as a miniature diocesan bishop or pope; 2) The elder may lose all rightful authority to the popular vote of the congregation (16:114).

Lastly, Owen’s contention against a single-elder model in caring for the sheep of Christ’s congregation came from the Old Testament. Rather than finding the ruling elder as an office originated in the New Testament era, like that of the deacon, Owen found the plurality of elders over God’s people to be a legacy rooted in Deuteronomy 1:15 (cf. Exod. 18:13–27; *Works*, 16:130).

In his subsequent chapter, “Church Polity or Rule, with the Duty of Elders,” Owen in many ways restated what had been said in his former chapter “Of the Rule of the Church, Or of Ruling Elders.” However, it was his aim in this latter chapter to further express his understanding of the task and duty of the elder in ruling over Christ’s sheep. In one such expansion on the work of the elder, Owen provided a most pastoral image in the importance and goal of ruling Christ’s sheep. Owen wrote, “The especial design of the rule of the church ... is, to represent the holiness, love, compassion, care, and authority of Christ towards his church. This is the great end of rule in the church” (16:135). What Owen said here can be viewed as an architectonic dimension of his pastoral theology at large, and reverberates especially under this specific duty.

Part of the pastor's role in caring for Christ's flock was to reflect Christ to the congregation. Though such a statement may appear most obvious to some, its simplicity and matter-of-factness does not remove the pastoral wisdom being unveiled by Owen in these moments. Rule is not simply about control, or broad organizational leadership structures. Rule is chiefly about reflecting the chief ruler, Christ the great Shepherd of the sheep. Transversely, when pastors and ruling elders fail to accomplish this Christ-reflective task, they "reflect the highest dishonor imaginable upon Christ himself" (16:135).

Though much more can be said, it is best to limit subsequent discussions on the nature of ruling Christ's church to the twelve heads which Owen provided as his conclusion on the duty of elders. Elders should:

1. Carefully watch over their particular congregation.
2. Seek out divisions within the church which may arise.
3. Exhort members of the duties of church membership.
4. Look for schismatic decay which may rend Christ's church.
5. Attend to the sick and the imprisoned.
6. Oversee and prudently guide the diaconal ministry.
7. Manage monies from other churches for their distribution.
8. Help inform the pastor on the condition of the church.
9. Assemble together, both ruling and teaching elders.
10. Honor the liberty of Christ's Church.
11. Be conversant with the elders of other congregations.
12. Maintain the congregation in times of pastoral transition (16:138–141).

Though extensive, Owen, as typical of *True Nature of a Gospel Church*, reminded his readers of the scope of this work, and its limited focus. Owen wrote, "[They] deserve a greater enlargement in their declaration and confirmation than I can here afford unto them ... but what hath been spoken is sufficient unto my present purpose" (16:141–142). The reflections and considerations that have been provided are ample enough to help portray the centrality of rule in Christ's church within Owen's theological system. For Owen, every practical element of pastoral rule needed to have its origin rooted in Scripture and the example of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing else would do for Owen.

DUTY #10: SEEKING GODLY FELLOWSHIP WITH LIKE-MINDED CHURCHES

Though Owen's Congregationalism is properly described as Independency, it is anything but independent. Godly adherence to the Scriptures, even amongst Congregationalists, did not lead to a rejection or willful ignoring of other like-minded gospel congregations. Rather it was the opposite! Owen did mark that he would subsequently provide his remarks on this duty later in *True Nature of a Gospel Work*. However, in his condensed explanation what he revealed was that this means of fellowship was a path towards the "edification of the churches" (16:88). In many ways, the Congregationalist's pursuit of communion with other like-minded congregations represents an advisory version of a presbytery, whereby churches may pursue advice, celebrate together, mourn together, and seek out theological wisdom in the form of synods or assemblies.

DUTY #11: LIVING AN EXEMPLARY CHRISTIAN LIFE

With all that has been thus far, Owen now pointed each minister to consider their own hearts. The last duty Owen wished to provide in this section was the foundation to every subsequent duty; namely, the moral character of the preacher himself. The spiritual vitality of the minister is so crucial that Owen considered it a non-negotiable requirement for every pastor. According to Owen, a pastor must be "humble, holy, exemplary [in] conversation, in all godliness and honesty ... without which all the rest [of the pastoral duties] will neither be useful unto men nor be accepted [by Christ]" (16:88). Simply put, if a pastor is impious, faithless, wicked, cruel, unloving, uncaring, sensual, and corrupt—his ministry will reflect his character before God. In short, it will be spiritually dead according to Owen.

Owen marked that he had no lack of Scriptural and historical evidence to prove this point, and does not bother to list out the materials, for it would be "an easy thing to fill up a volume with ancient examples unto this purpose" (16:88). Owen warned his readers that if such spiritually diabolical characters are allowed to continue in their ministry, the inevitable end will be that "we may take our leave of all the glory and power of religion among the people committed unto their charge" (16:89). With such situations, all the externals of religion may persist, and may even procure more members, however, whatever may follow will not be of the Lord, and certainly not be to the edification of the Name of Christ, or of His bride, the Church. For

Owen, a minister of Christ must seek to reflect Christ, not merely in word, but most especially in thought and deed.

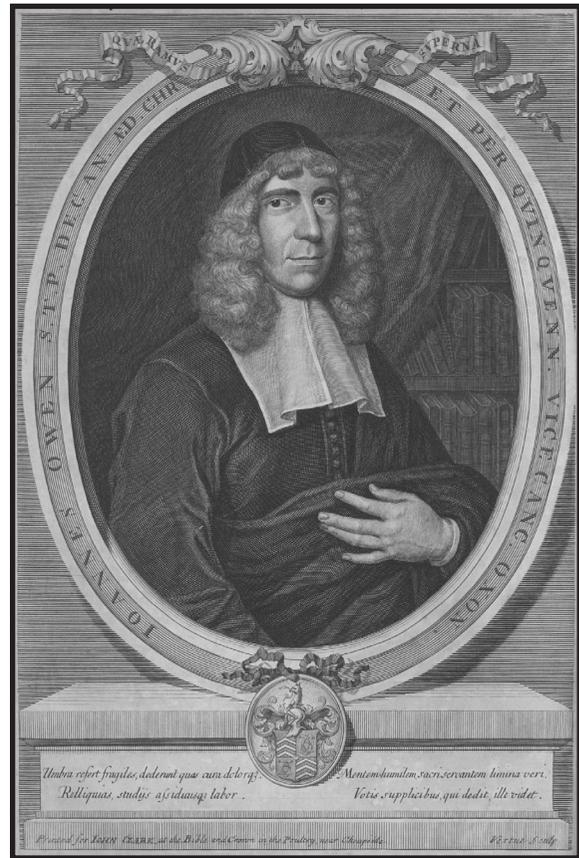
CONCLUSION

With all that has been mentioned, the pursuit of a distilled understanding of Owen's pastoral theology is indeed attainable. In returning to Owen's initial definition of a pastor, he shared what he believed to be the summary of pastoral ministry under a single word: *Feeding*. The heart of pastoral ministry according to Owen existed in the pastor's duty to feed the flock with the Word of God. What Owen made explicit was that he tied every subsequent duty under the heading of pastoral ministry under that very word. "The first and principal duty of a pastor" Owen wrote, "is to *feed the flock* by diligent preaching of the word" (16:74). Feeding the flock was not allowed to take a secondary, or even tertiary role. Owen continued, "This feeding is of the essence of the office of a pastor ... he who doth not, or can not, or will not feed the flock is no pastor, whatever the outward call or work he may have in the church" (16:76). In Owen's eyes, this is a non-negotiable reality for anyone who would dare to call themselves pastors, or bishops, which for Owen were synonymous terms. But this single task of "feeding the flock" in practice is divided under two heads: 1. "Teaching or instruction"; 2. "Rule or discipline" (16:48). The centrality of Owen's pastoral theology was therefore bound under these two expressions which define for him the task of "feeding the flock." He verified this as he wrote, "Unto these two heads may all the acts and duties of a shepherd toward his flock be reduced; and both are intended in the term of 'feeding'" (16:48).

Owen had no limit of words available to him. In fact, as one considers the eleven duties provided by him, there were many options accessible to him to help articulate the mission of a pastor. Owen was drawn uniquely to several Scriptural texts when discussing pastoral ministry. He provided two sizable lists of Scripture references that he believed to codify the Christ-authorized duties of pastoral ministry. But the second list which is principally concerned with the task of feeding the flock is as follows: 1 Chronicles 11:2; 17:6; Jeremiah 23:2; Micah 5:4; 7:14; Zechariah 11:7; Acts 20:28; John 21:15–17; 1 Peter 5:2 (*Works*, 16:48).

If his definition of pastoral ministry is best summarized in the language of "feeding," then his key text in distilling pastoral ministry comes from 1 Peter 5:1–4. Returning to Owen's succinct definition of pastoral

ministry, one finds only one text in view: 1 Peter 5:2. He considered the Petrine language as the backbone of his enterprise in establishing a biblically-defined pastoral theology, taking up its very words as the core of shepherding. 1 Peter 5:2 reads, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight *thereof*, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind" (KJV). Both "feeding" and "taking oversight" are for Owen the key features of pastoral ministry, "A pastor is the elder that feeds and rules the flock, 1 Pet. v. 2; that is, who is its teacher and its bishop: Ποιμάννατε, ἐπισκοποῦντες, 'Feed, taking the oversight'" (*Works*, 16:47).■



John Owen (1616–1683) by George Virtue (1684–1756), line engraving published by John Clark (1721). *Umbra refert fragiles dederunt quas cura dolorque. Relliquias, studiis assiduusque labor. Mentem humilem, sacri servantem limina veri. Votis supplicibus, qui dedit, ille videt.* "This shadow shows the frail remains; Of sickness, cares and studious pains. The mind in humble posture waits; At sacred truth's celestial gates, And keeps those bounds with holy fear, While he that gave it sees it there" (translation by Isaac Watts, *The Works* (London, 1753), volume 4, p. 574).